The linguistics of violence in film and on television is a hotly debated topic, especially whenever outrageously violent crimes are committed in the community. The debate tends to proceed thus: was the perpetrator addicted to watching violent films and videos, and if so, did the language of mediated violence translate into the language of everyday action, blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality? The cause effect relationship between fantasies enacted on screen and horrific real-life crimes has never been proven scientifically, despite endless governmental inquiries and many attempts by academics to discover a causation formula.

I will not be looking so much at the vexed question of the relationship between stylized violence on celluloid and real violence in a community. Rather, I wish to explore the nature of a particular form of mediated, gendered violence through an analysis of the language of several key films made in the past decade focusing on the violent crime of rape: Hollywood films *The Accused* (1988), *Casualties of War* (1989), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Strange Days* (1996), and the Australian films *Shame* (1988) and *The Boys* (1998). In this way, I wish to show how rape is depicted linguistically in film, and how such films may actually give solutions to this abhorrent kind of violence rather than thrill the viewer vicariously, or, in a worst case scenario, stimulate people to further violence.

Film language is a particular form of language, a kind of marriage between technology and expression. It naturally involves the dialogue between characters within any film, but that is only one of many linguistic possibilities of expression in this medium. Other elements in the expression of film language include lighting, editing, camera angles and movement, color, costumes, placement and movement of characters, and setting.

The Accused, directed in 1988 by Jonathan Kaplan, starred Kelly McGillis as a middle-class lawyer and Jodie Foster in an Academy Award winning performance as a working-class girl who is gang-raped in a bar in a rough part of town. While the rape case does not stand up, the perpetrators are found guilty of the lesser crime, reckless endangerment. Later after the victim protests to the lawyer for doing "deals" because of her ostensible unreliability, another (successful) case is mounted against a second group of men who goaded the rapists on.

The question of the instability of females as credible witnesses and/or victims is certainly raised by the film and never really resolved, as the Jodie Foster character undermines her own authenticity at various times within the film, often unwittingly. While this does add to the complexity of the protagonist, it also muddies the interpretive waters regarding her own ambivalent complicity in the violent sexual acts. This gives the film's audience a certain uneasy, voyeuristic viewing position from which to read the film. It has been claimed that groups of men borrow the video *The Accused* simply to be stimulated by the flashback rape scene, viewed out of context. While this is undoubtedly far from the filmmakers' intentions, the actual showing of the rape itself in graphic detail is not really necessary to give the victim credibility. The moral and artistic dimensions of the representation of rape in film involve therefore this linguistic issue of overstatement versus understatement, which will be explored here in other films that foreground the discourse of rape.

Casualties of War, a 1989 film directed by Brian De Palma, concentrates on an ostensibly true story of a gang rape perpetrated on a Vietcong girl by a group of US soldiers in the Vietnam War. It is one of the many "purging the war guilt" films of the 1980s that have reached our screens. One of the stars of the film, Michael J. Fox, plays the hero, an outraged

onlooker to his peer group's war crimes. Sean Penn plays the company's out-of-control commander and the instigator of the rape.

The powerful scene building up to the rape is very instructive in relation to the language of violence in this film. Fox tries to resist and talk his fellow soldiers out of it, but their blood is up and, goaded by Penn, they are ready for anything, a kind of rape-as-revenge for all the perceived wrongs done by the Vietcong to their company. Fox is counting on a Filipino soldier to help him hold out against the others, and he signals to him to stand firm. But Penn deliberately misinterprets the signal as some kind of gay cop-out. He circles the group, mocking the pair until the Filipino soldier can no longer hold out against the peer group.

Penn's movements are choreographed to dominate the circle and to instill fear in the waiting girl as well as the supposedly wimpish Fox character. Penn carries his gun aloft, taunting Fox with threats of sodomizing him after he rapes the girl. Calling his gun a toy, an object of pleasure, he then cradles his penis in his hand terming it the weapon, thereby grimly distinguishing the phallic symbol of the gun from the real weaponry of rape, his penis. The hegemonic masculinity represented by the Penn character seeks ascendancy through both the penis and the phallic gun, diminishing the power of the marginal men, the Filipino soldier and the Fox character whose sexuality is challenged. A phallic hierarchy of power is both reaffirmed and laid open to question in the film. However this bleak film shows no solution to masculine violence.

Amore recent American film, *Strange Days*, was made by a woman director, Kathryn Bigalow. This film is set in the 24 hours building up to December 31, 1999, and shows a chaotic and violent Los Angeles whose citizens are addicted to "wire-tripping," a kind of virtual-reality game which allows the viewer to feel everything the perpetrator feels-pure, uncut life. The most shocking moment in the film comes when our hero, Lenny (played by Ralph Fiennes), finds, to his great dismay, that he has in his possession a rape and murder snuff tape, which he is able to experience from the points of view of both perpetrator and victim.

The film shows this horrific tape in all its detail. The audience is positioned to find it repugnant, rather than pleasurable, as our viewing of it is filtered through the emotions and responses of Lenny, who is apparently totally repulsed by it. However, this is problematic from a cinematic viewpoint, as a kind of voyeuristic slippage may occur, especially later in the film where a mirror-image simulated rape/murder sequence unfolds. This time the violence is acted out for thrills, echoing the earlier scenario and at the same time undercutting and trivializing it. This overblown, overcharged film gives no solution for rape victims or any spectator concerned about rape. The fact that *Strange Days* was directed by a woman does not mean, of course, that a feminist perspective on rape was constructed in this Hollywood film.

A new impressive Australian film is *The Boys* (1998), directed by first-time director Rowan Woods. This film is chilling and stark, a day in the life of a family of brothers and their single mother, who are at the same time falling apart and out of control. The unspeakable crime to be committed is never quite shown; rather, we see the relentless build-up and, unusually, the grim aftermath in a cleverly inserted series of flash-forwards. David Wenham is brilliant as the key protagonist, Brett Sprague, who hurtles himself and his brothers towards their collective doom, taking innocent bystanders along for the ride.

The film, like its theatrical forerunner, is rumored to be based on the Anita Cobby case, one of the worst rape-murders in Australian crime history. At one level, whether it is or not is really beside the point. There is a universality about the narrative that would doubtless impact on all western cultures. However, once it was in my mind, I couldn't escape thinking of the horrendous Cobby case while I watched the film, and this certainly gave my experience an extra dimension of unease with its layers of imagined horror and anticipation.

A potent sense of female fear in an unsafe environment permeates *The Boys.* All the females including their mother (played brilliantly by veteran Australian actor Lyn Curran) circle the boys warily. Each scene indoors shows the characters tightly framed using a technique called double-framing. This means that the actors are framed within windows and doors, giving an overall impression of entrapment. In one ugly scene Brett's girlfriend taunts Brett because he appears to be impotent after his time in jail. This ends with her hairclip being painfully wrenched from her hair with many strands dangling from it, Brett pocketing this as a trophy after she breaks free. Later his mother notices this symbol of his violence and tries involuntarily to restrain her terrified realization of what he is capable of doing, both then and in the future.

This film bears comparison to an equally strong Australian film of a decade ago, *Shame* (Steve Jodrell), which was most probably based on actual gang rapes in a notorious small town. Again, knowing the film's basis in fact adds a certain inescapable resonance. As in The Boys, the film Shame does not actually show gang rape. Both films can be applauded for their powerful use of understatement, unlike the American film, The Accused, which despite its undeniablc power, still has to show the audience the actual rape, as if to convince us that she did not "ask for it."

In a way, the Australian film *Shame* does, through the graphic depiction of aftershocks, create a similar sense of menace to *The Boys*, with certain frightening if aborted rape attempts and decidedly nasty insinuations staged by males against females at various key points. However, Shame is more about consequences and aftermath, the impact of a secret, shameful rape culture on a complicit community. The tragic but ultimately triumphant resolution in *Shame* shows that nonviolent community action may overcome a vicious cycle of violence. The resolution is tragic in that the main rape victim who fights back is killed when she tries to escape her kidnappers. On the other hand, the resolution is triumphant in that her death is a dramatic catalyst to action by a wounded, intimidated community. They rally behind an outsider, the barrister-heroine of this feminist neo-western film, who rides into town on her motor bike and stays reluctantly like the western hero Shane, to right the wrongs in a small twisted town.

An American version of this Australian film was made in the early 1990s. It is instructive to compare the two versions. In the U.S. version the bikey barrister has a gun; in the Australian version she is an expert in self-defense and in negotiating the law, rather than meeting violence with violence. Compared with one of its near-contemporary films, Thelma and Louise (Ridley Scott), Shame shows itself to be ahead of its time. Like Thelma and Louise, Shame constructs cinematically the problem of rape and attempted rape. Both are technically rape revenge films, a problematic fantasy genre where women tend to meet violence with violence, and more often than not end up trapped in its grim circle. While the film *Thelma and Louise* constructs the women from a sympathetic standpoint, these "bitches from hell," as one of their male revenge victims calls them, do use phallic power for their own ultimately futile ends-the gun, the car, the traditional landscape from western and road movies. Hence

there is no counterconstruction of female power and a female space that is legitimated in the film. Louise and Thelma, victims of rape and attempted rape, respectively, are rendered powerless within the text despite some small moments of triumph and liberation.

On the one hand, the film *Thelma and Louise* offers no solution except a desperate escape from the patriarchal institutions of the family and the law, and ultimately a death-by-suicide. By seeking to define women's experiences of rape, the film merely limits their options, and the patriarchy triumphs. On the other hand, Shame gives us some hope for a way to break the pattern of oppression and violence. The film moves beyond the spectacle of the sacrificial death of one rape victim to a nonviolent, community-based solution where the women and the marginal men group together to overcome the masculinist forces of the status quo.

A decade on with the American film *Strange Days* and the Australian film *The Boys*, there is no redemption, only rage and despair. Perhaps filmmakers today should focus on the nonviolent articulation of the exemplary 1980s Australian film Shame for progressive, forward-looking inspiration, particularly with regard to female empowerment through a community solution to sexual violence. Renewed, imaginative expressions cinematically may help fight the very real problems of rape within our cultures into the new millennium.

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